

# Expatriates' Influence on Knowledge Sharing: An Empirical Study With International Portuguese Companies

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**Abstract:** Despite the abundant literature in knowledge management, few empirical studies have explored knowledge management in connection with international assignees. This phenomenon has a special relevance in the Portuguese context, since (a) there are no empirical studies concerning this issue that involves international Portuguese companies; (b) the national business reality is incipient as far as internationalisation is concerned, and; (c) the organisational and national culture presents characteristics that are distinctive from the most highly studied contexts (*e.g.*, Asia, USA, Scandinavian countries, Spain, France, The Netherlands, Germany, England and Russia). We examine the role of expatriates in transfer and knowledge sharing within the Portuguese companies with operations abroad. We focus specifically on expatriates' role on knowledge sharing connected to international Portuguese companies and our findings take into account organizational representatives' and expatriates' perspectives. Using a comparative case study approach, we examine how three main dimensions influence the role of expatriates in knowledge sharing among headquarters and their subsidiaries (types of international assignment, reasons for using expatriation and international assignment characteristics). Data were collected using semi-structured interviews to 30 Portuguese repatriates and 14 organizational representatives from seven Portuguese companies. The findings suggest that the reasons that lead Portuguese companies to expatriating employees are connected to: (1) business expansion needs; (2) control of international operations and; (3) transfer and knowledge sharing. Our study also shows that Portuguese companies use international assignments in order to positively respond to the increasingly decaying domestic market in the economic areas in which they operate. Evidence also reveals that expatriation is seen as a strategy to fulfill main organizational objectives through their expatriates (*e.g.*, business internationalization, improvement of the coordination and control level of the units/subsidiaries abroad, replication of aspects of the home base, development and incorporation of new organizational techniques and processes). We also conclude that Portuguese companies have developed an International Human Resources Management strategy, based on an ethnocentric approach, typically associated with companies in early stages of internationalization, *i.e.*, the authority and decision making are centered in the home base. Expatriates have a central role in transmitting culture and technical knowledge from company's headquarters to the company's branches. Based on the findings, the article will discuss in detail the main theoretical and managerial implications. Suggestions for further research will also be presented.

**Keywords:** international Portuguese companies, expatriates, knowledge sharing, knowledge transfer, international assignments

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## 1. Introduction

The internationalization of business, the globalization of the economies and the free circulation of people and goods at a global scale have contributed to the increase in expatriation (Baruch *et al.*, 2002; Scullion and Brewster, 2001). An expatriate is an employee sent by a company to another company of the group, to work in another country for a defined period of time, which can last from six months to several years (Avril and Magnini, 2007). Previous research (*e.g.* Brookfield GRS, 2010; Harzing, 2001) indicates that the proportion of expatriates in multinational companies has been growing in recent years. In this context, expatriates have a fundamental role on knowledge transference between headquarters and their subsidiaries (Lazarova and Tarique, 2005) and can help company to understand the business opportunities in relation to other parts of the world, because they have knowledge about these particular cultural contexts and specific market and customer information (Lazarova and Caligiuri, 2001).

The role of expatriates as vehicles for disseminating knowledge across multinational corporation (MNC) units has emerged as a new area in the international human resource management (IHRM) literature (Minbaeva and Michailova, 2004). Some studies (*e.g.* Bonache and Brewster, 2001; Tsang, 1999) show that MNCs are interested in using expatriates as knowledge transfer agents.

Despite the importance of this theme in literature, empirical studies (*e.g.*, Baruch *et al.*, 2002; Caligiuri and Colakoglu, 2007) focus mainly on companies based in the USA, the United Kingdom, Finland, Germany, Australia, and studies of a similar nature in companies based in Portugal are unknown. Therefore, this research intends to continue the studies already conducted in other countries. It is the aim of the present research to

identify the expatriates' role in the process of growth of Portuguese companies. Although the main focus of this research refers to a specific geographic area (*i.e.*, Portugal), the data from this study will provide a basis for comparative analysis within an international context. We have chosen Portuguese companies as a sample because the number of Portuguese expatriates has increased in recent years. However, the experience of Portuguese Companies relating to this issue is scarce. On the other hand, research on knowledge management in MNCs has generally focused on subsidiaries. Only a few studies have explored knowledge management in connection with international assignees. Thus, our research questions are: How do the types and other characteristics of international assignment and reasons for adopting expatriation help us to understand the role of expatriates in knowledge sharing? How is the degree of knowledge transfer among headquarters and their subsidiaries enhanced?

This paper is structured in the following way: in the next section, the literature on the role of expatriates in transfer and knowledge sharing will be reviewed; afterwards, the methodology used in the empirical research and the presentation of the main results will be presented. Finally, the paper shall be concluded with a discussion on the key findings and future research directions.

## **2. Theory**

### **2.1 Expatriates as control and learning agents and as diffusers of knowledge**

International assignments continue to have an essential role in maintaining and generating high business value (Brookfield GRS, 2010). In general, expatriates are professionals entrusted with this responsibility. Generally, they are considered to be transfer, learning and dissemination of knowledge agents (Minbaeva and Michailova, 2004), due to:

- *Acting as transfer agents* when they transfer routines, information, knowledge (explicit and implicit), values/culture from headquarters to subsidiaries. This happens when, for example, they teach the natives the headquarters' typical actions or base their decision-making on "adequate" knowledge, expertise and guidance;
- *Acting as learning agents* when, for instance, (i) they learn new ways of operating in the host country, (ii) they enhance decision-making mechanisms adjusted to that particular country, (iii) they acquire knowledge about the foreign culture; (iv) they create interpersonal relationship networks; (v) they understand the legal, social, political and economic environment of the host country;
- *Acting as agents of knowledge diffusion* when they transfer to headquarters (and/or to other company subsidiaries) the knowledge acquired throughout their international experience. Such diffusion occurs when expatriates share and disseminate their knowledge.

The literature (*e.g.*, Minbaeva and Michailova, 2004) suggests that the expatriate's role is to disseminate knowledge amongst the different multinational subsidiaries. This necessity is greater when the duration of the international assignment is longer. Therefore, there is ground to believe that, besides facilitating communication, expatriates transfer knowledge and experience among the different subsidiaries and headquarters. Moreover, they are better equipped to more consistently manage work according to the company's overall interests. When good management is observed, expatriates are assumed as the responsible agents for expatriation success.

### **2.2 Types of international assignment**

The literature (*e.g.*, Lazarova and Caligiuri, 2001; Harzing, 2001) proposes four different types of international assignments:

- *Technical international assignment.* Its main objective is to ensure that the expatriate performs technical work and returns to his/her current position in the home company. The employee is not required to develop intercultural skills in order to be successful in the international assignment;
- *Tactical or functional international assignment.* The expatriate goes on an international assignment to do a specific job and returns to his/her current job in the home company. In general, the experience of the international assignment is similar to the acquired experience in the home company;
- *Developmental international assignment.* The reason behind this international assignment is the developing of high-potential talent based on the development of overall management skills. Typically, the

recipients of this type of assignment are leaders, to whom Caligiuri (2006) recommends an internal rotation program after returning to the home company, so as to develop leadership skills;

- *Executive or strategic international assignment* is targeted at executives with nuclear positions in the company. This type of assignment helps to acquire the skills required for the general development of intra-organizational career plans. According to Caligiuri (2006), this type of mission requires an added concern after returning to the home company so as to ensure a new job that allows implementing the new global competencies developed, which, in turn, are assumed as critical to the executive worker and the home company.

### **2.3 Reasons for adopting expatriation practices**

Various literature references (e.g., Bonache *et al.*, 2001; Minbaeva and Michailova, 2004) suggest that this diversity of organizational reasons may require expatriates to transfer knowledge and experience among the branches (and among themselves and the home office), to coordinate units globally interdependent and to carry out the local adaptations without affecting the global company, namely:

- *Initiating operations in foreign countries and transfer knowledge and competencies* (Bonache *et al.*, 2001; Minbaeva and Michailova, 2004). This reason is linked to the need to send teams or employees to promote the transfer, control and dissemination of knowledge through all the multinational business units. In addition to this, they are also provided with cross-cultural skills to facilitate communication and cooperation between headquarters and branch offices;
- *Transmission of the national image and representation of corporate home office* (Bonache *et al.*, 2001). This reason is linked to the multinational company in the initial phase of development that tends to assign national employees to positions of greater trust in branches in third countries. This decision aims to ensure the success and development of the home office's new businesses established in new international markets;
- *Control and coordination of global activities* (Bonache *et al.*, 2001; Harvey and Novicevic, 2001). This reason is directly linked to the interest in the global integration of the company's trans-national activities. Through the expatriates, they seek to replicate the values and objectives of the home office in the culture of the branch where the international assignment is taking place;
- *Career development for executive positions* (Bonache *et al.*, 2001; Harzing, 2001). This reason is used by companies that include a career development plan of their executive managers on an international assignment as an essential condition;
- *Development of a global mentality in the organization* (Bonache *et al.*, 2001; Harzing, 2001). This reason is based on the fact that international companies intend to develop an integrated perspective of the organization, share new ideas, strategies and action among the different business units of the organization, regardless of their country of origin;
- *Lack of local talent* (Baruch *et al.*, 2002; Harzing, 2001; Minbaeva and Michailova, 2004). This reason is explained by the need from companies to send employees equipped with distinctive technical, interpersonal and management competencies to branches in other countries lacking in local candidates qualified for the available job post. The expatriate's individual competencies can be improved without the incidence of a great disparity in experience between the work performed before and during the international assignment.

## **3. Methods**

### **3.1 Case selection**

We opted for a qualitative case study methodology to gain a comprehensive, in-depth understanding the role of expatriate to improve knowledge sharing. In order to do so, three criteria were adopted to choose the cases for analysis. Firstly, the companies should be located in Portugal. Secondly, they should conform to a formal HRM structure. Thirdly, they should have expatriation experience (*i.e.* have expatriates and repatriates). Given that Yin (2003) suggests that a multiple case-study should present between 4 and 10 cases, we have a theoretical and intentional sample (Creswell, 1998) seven companies, which have been interviewed. All companies were private and based in the North of Portugal: three comprised the industrial sector (ICA, IEE, IMC), two of them were integrated in the commerce and distribution sector (CDA and CDS), two belonged to

the services sector (SFA and SSA). Three companies had had expatriation experience more than ten years before, and four of them had had this experience less than five years before. The majority (57,2%) has less than one thousand workers and thirty-five months had been the average period of the international assignment. These companies have subsidiaries in different countries (*e.g.* Angola, Brazil, China and Germany). Table 1 summarizes the main characteristics of the companies included in the study.

**Table 1:** Characteristics of companies studied

Company	Business Sector	Number of workers	Number of expatriates	Duration of expatriation (average in months)
CDA	Commerce/ distribution	960	66	47
CDS	Commerce/distribution	35000	90	40
ICA	Industry	1800	258	16
IEE	Industry	4500	160	48
IMC	Industry	932	10	27
SFA	Services	295	6	51
SSA	Services	598	23	16,5

Fourteen organizational representatives (eight males; aged 39 in average) have participated in this study. Six performed technical functions related to the HR department (a lawyer, two operational managers and three technical coordinators) and eight belong to direction boards (seven Human Resources Directors and a CEO). The majority possessed a university degree ( $n=12$ ), one had a Masters' course and another had the twelfth grade.

Thirty repatriates (25 males; aged 43 in average) were interviewed. The vast majority of repatriates ( $n= 16$ ) possessed a university degree, five of them had post-graduated qualifications (MBA and a Masters' Degree) three had a BA, five had finished twelfth grade, and one had finished ninth grade. As for their marital status, 7 were single, 20 were married and three were divorced.

### 3.2 Data collection and coding

Semi-structured interviews were made to organizational representatives (two per company) and to repatriates (four or five per company) between October 2009 and March 2010. A total of forty-four interviews were made (fourteen to organizational representatives, thirty to repatriates after completing the expatriation assignment). All interviewees were native Portuguese and all interviews were conducted in Portuguese, by the same researcher. Particular attention was paid to the data collection about the types of international assignments; reasons for expatriation and role of this repatriates on international assignments. The average duration of each interview was 70 minutes. They were tape-recorded, data were transcribed and categorized based on 'commonalities and differences' across emerging themes and then frequencies for each category were determined (Ghauri and Gronhaug 2002). To ensure anonymity identification codes were assigned to each company: CDA; CDS; ICA; IEE; IMC; SFA; SSA. In each company, repatriates called REPAT and organizational representatives called REPORG. Confidentiality was granted to interviewees and to the companies, as well.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Types of assignment

Expatriate roles during the international assignment are related to the type of international assignment. We have found three types of international assignments in the companies studied (*cf.* summary in table 2).

**Table 2:** Repatriates' distribution by company and type of assignment

Type of assignment	Companies							Total
	CDA	CDS	ICA	IEE	IMC	SFA	SSA	
Technical	3	1	4	2	1	1	3	15
Tactical or functional	1	1	1	0	2	1	1	7
Strategic/executive	1	2	0	2	1	2	0	8

### **Technical international assignments**

All companies use expatriates to perform technical responsibilities. The ICA is a company that encourages the use of expatriates for international assignments of this type ( $n = 4$ ) as opposed to CDS, SFA, IMC ( $n = 1$  in each company). Most expatriates go on an international assignment in order to give their contribution to support technical activities which are determinant of the success of the foreign subsidiaries and of their return to the home company. These expatriates carried out specific projects and, once they were finished, they had returned to their headquarters.

### **Tactical or functional international assignments**

The tactical or functional type of international assignments has been adopted by these Portuguese companies as well. Its use is more recurrent in IMC ( $n = 2$ ). This type of international assignment is not implemented by the IEE company. The companies that adopt this type of international assignment instruct expatriates so as to ensure the support of important but not critical maintenance activities of the foreign branches. The expatriate's assignment is to perform specific tasks allowing him/her to develop skills.

### **Strategic/executive international assignments**

The companies adopt this type of international assignment instructing expatriates to be fully responsible for foreign subsidiaries. Such assignments are aimed at executive expatriates who have high levels of responsibility within the company. This type of assignment has been adopted by in 5 companies (IMC, SFA, IEE, CDA, CDS). In this type of international assignment, expatriates' tasks include controlling international operations or transferring organizational culture from headquarters to foreign subsidiaries.

To sum up, the results have suggested that there were different roles assigned to expatriates which, per se, determine different types of international assignments. The assignments of a technical type were the most common. Although it was observed in all companies, the CDS and the SFA have shown a greater tendency to adopt assignments of a strategic/executive type.

## **4.2 Organizational reasons for expatriation**

Two of the main reasons why companies revert to expatriation were identified: i) control of international operations ( $n=8$ ) and; ii) business needs ( $n=6$ ). Table 3 summarizes the organizational reasons identified by organizational representatives of companies included in the study.

**Table 3:** Organizational reasons, per company

Organizational reasons	CDA	CDS	ICA	IEE	IMC	SFA	SSA	Total
Control of international operations	0	2	1	1	2	2	0	8
Business needs	2	0	1	1	0	0	2	6

### **Control of international operations**

The companies (CDS, IEE, IMC, ICA, SFA) refer that one of the main reasons for deciding to expatriate executives is connected to the need to control international operations while the subsidiaries do not become autonomous ( $n=8$ , this is referred to by both organizational representatives of CDS, IMC and SFA and, by one organizational representative from the companies ICA and IEE). Sending trustworthy people with knowledge of the culture and business helps improving the home company and its subsidiaries institutional representation in the foreign country. Besides, it also facilitates the diffusion of the know-how from the home company to the subsidiaries. These arguments are explained in the following words:

*... when opening a branch abroad, Portuguese workers are sent abroad (...) these have already a perfect knowledge of the organization, where they are going to start working. And those kinds of people, who belong to the company's permanent staff, are the ones we acknowledge to be able to represent the organization abroad.... (REPORG 1, ICA)*

Once subsidiaries are set up in other markets, some of these companies (CDS, IEE) defend the need to maintain national collaborators in top management positions, so that national cultural and business values can be replicated in these other foreign structures. This argument is clearly illustrated in the following arguments:

*... typically, what IEE does is to place at the head of the business in a subsidiary, either the CEO or, whenever possible, the CFO... we want to control the business, and the best way to control it is either through the CEO or through the CFO... Although we respect the local culture, we like to add value to it (by hiring, teaching and training local workers) we wish, above all, to continue and take our values, our culture, our mission, our way of life, our business ethics to the markets where we are. In short, everything that characterizes the culture of IEE in Portugal ...we try to replicate it in the selected target-markets. (REPORT 1, IEE)*

### **Business needs**

The national market is showing signs of decline, thus the companies studied feel the need to reorient their expansion strategies internationally so as not to lose business. The need for business growth through internationalization is another main reason, especially for the companies CDA, ICA, IEE, SSA (n=6, this is referred to by both organizational representatives of the companies CDA and SSA and by one of the organizational representatives of the companies ICA and IEE), as illustrated in the following statements:

*The principle of necessity is in the basis [of expatriation] ... there really is a strong investment at that level [the expatriation of highly competent staff, with great potential from CDA headquarters]. This happens because about 70% of the Group's cost-effectiveness is in the international area in the next 10 years. (REPORT 2, CDA)*

## **5. Discussion and conclusion**

On the one hand, the results of this study indicate that there is a group of companies (CDA, IEE, SSA and IMC) that generally share the same organizational reasons for expatriation. That is to say, they assume the international assignments according to the need of finding alternatives to the increasingly decaying domestic market in the economic areas in which they operate. On the other hand, evidence reveals that expatriation is assumed as a strategy to fulfill some of the main organizational objectives (e.g., business internationalization, improvement of the coordination and control level of the units/subsidiaries abroad, replication of the home base aspects, development and incorporation of new organizational techniques and processes).

The organizational reasons for expatriation found in these companies are congruent with the majority of the literature reviewed (e.g., Bonache *et al.*, 2001). However, comparing the results found to those recently obtained by Tungli and Peiperl (2009), Portuguese companies tend to resemble companies in the United Kingdom and Japan (i.e., using expatriation to create a new operation) more than the U.S. companies (i.e., to fill competency gaps).

Companies in the early stages of international development tend to draw more attention to expatriations of a technical or functional type (Caligiuri and Colakoglu, 2007). This can help us to understand the reason why expatriations of a functional and technical type predominate in Portuguese companies over expatriations of a developmental and strategic type. Additionally, the management of expatriates in these companies seems to be in congruency with the opinion of Mayrhofer and Brewster (1996) and of Perlmutter (1969) who state that the majority of European companies organize and maintain an IHRM according to an ethnocentric approach. In other words, the authority and the decision making are centered in the home base. This type of IHRM strategy is characteristic of companies in the early stages of internationalization, whose occupation of the core positions in the branches is attributed to home base expatriates. The expatriates have a leading role in the culture and technical knowledge transfer of the home base to the international branches. The companies with an ethnocentric management of their HR tend to consider the home base expatriates better and more trustworthy than the native collaborators from countries where the branches are located. This evidence helps to understand why the expatriates' competence development is not one of the organizational reasons referred to by these Portuguese companies.

Similar to the conclusions of Scullion and Brewster (2001), the results of this research seem to demonstrate that, from an organizational perspective, the expatriate's role is linked to the need to improve knowledge sharing, which confirms the strategic importance of expatriates in these Portuguese companies. Our findings show that expatriates have also long been regarded as part of a knowledge network in international companies (Reiche *et al.*, 2011). They also have shown how the expatriates acquire the knowledge that they can subsequently disseminate to the wider organization. Our research additionally suggests that if expatriates develop links and share values with the host company staff, they will be more likely to acquire company-



specific knowledge that they will potentially be able to disseminate and/or facilitate ongoing learning and knowledge sharing further in the home company upon completion of their assignments (Reiche *et al.*, 2011).

Some of the benefits of the expatriates' influence on knowledge sharing/transfer are the contributions that they may give to the subsidiaries' performance improvement through their individual and corporative knowledge. Furthermore, through knowledge transfer, the subsidiaries' global knowledge can be enhanced so as to better understand international company networks, namely when expatriates are sent to different organisation areas. According to Crowne (2009), expatriates can be very important when it comes to a better understanding of local market, knowledge about foreign culture, understanding of the macro-economic environment and/or infrastructure distribution. Typically, expatriates have extended experience within the home companies when chosen for international assignments. Thence, they usually show to have a solid knowledge on corporative objectives and strategies. Consequently, they are an important vehicle to the success of knowledge transfer and dissemination between the home company and the subsidiary (Minbaeva and Michailova, 2004). Finally, the expatriates' role is also significant on both knowledge dissemination and absorption, especially when home company knowledge needs to be transferred to foreign subsidiaries because of host country markets differences (Li and Scullion, 2010).

As for the problems that may arise from the expatriates' influence on knowledge transfer, we can say that it might not be always beneficial for the subsidiaries. For example, when expatriates show insufficient knowledge on the host country culture and local business operators (Fang *et al.*, 2010), the local workers are in advantage. Finally, there is also the possibility of both expatriates and local workers knowing little about each other's knowledge. This can be also a problem to knowledge sharing among expatriates and local workers (Li and Scullion, 2010).

Research implications also emerge from this theoretical discussion. Firstly, it expands previous research on expatriates' role in the Portuguese context. Secondly, the results confirm previous studies (*e.g.* Bonache and Brewster, 2001; Reiche *et al.*, 2011, Tsang, 1999) by providing empirical evidence on the type of assignment and organizational reasons for expatriation and how expatriates from headquarters can make a contribution to knowledge sharing and transfer. Our study shows that improving knowledge transfer is more important than improving knowledge sharing.

Our results might suggest managerial implications as well, especially in terms of how to develop the capacity to improve knowledge transfer and sharing between headquarters and their subsidiaries.

Finally, our study has some limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings and should be considered when pursuing further research. First of all, we have analysed a specific context. These companies were all Portuguese, and it may not be possible to generalize these results to other companies, especially in other countries with different characteristics. Future research may opt for distinct methods of data collection (*e.g.*, questionnaire surveys) addressed to a broader universe (not just the number of cases, but also in the diversity of respondents) in order to obtain information and to analyze the broader Portuguese organizational context. It is important that future studies do continue this approach, with a larger sample of both the companies and the repatriates so as to allow comparisons.

To sum up, this study encourages investigation paths so that future researchers can enhance and deepen knowledge on the subject and help the emergent internationalization process of Portuguese companies.

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